

Bertrand Russell and the ideal of critical receptiveness

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) enjoys a well deserved place amongst the outstanding skeptics of the twentieth century.¹ His work not only sets a powerful example of skepticism in practice, but also helps to clarify the nature and value of skepticism. Russell, of course, explicitly rejects what he calls a lazy skepticism and dogmatic doubt, where all inquiry is regarded as pointless and doomed to failure, arguing instead for a constructive skepticism which seeks approximate truth even though certainty is unattainable. He is anxious that his own position be seen as a form of rational doubt which requires that beliefs be held with the degree of conviction warranted by the evidence. Tentative truth replaces cocksure certainty.

Russell identifies two dispositions at the heart of the inquiring spirit, dispositions which to some extent tend in different directions but which need to co-exist in a dynamic tension and delicate equilibrium if either one is to serve its purpose in promoting the pursuit of truth. He strongly endorses a welcoming attitude towards new and controversial ideas, albeit infused with a definite reluctance and disinclination to give full assent to any idea before it has passed careful scrutiny. This is the complex, almost paradoxical, stance of critical receptiveness.²

Achieving an effective and appropriate balance here is by no means easy, and we are always in danger of veering away from something approximating the ideal situation where these twin dispositions complement and support each other, to a situation in which one begins to displace the other with unfortunate consequences. In harmony, however, they constitute an outlook which is fundamental to serious inquiry.

The Spirit of Inquiry

It is sometimes maintained that philosophers have traditionally regarded ideals such as truth, rationality, and impartiality, especially in the context of science, as relatively unproblematic notions; and that this simplistic view has only recently been discredited by

postmodernist thinking (Keller 1995, 11). Contrary to these suggestions, however, contemporary awareness of the deeply problematic nature of such ideas, and of related intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness and love of truth, is greatly indebted to philosophers of an earlier generation, such as Russell, who were under no illusions about the complexities in such ideals and who helped to reveal the dubiousness of naive confidence in them. Unlike many critics today, however, Russell sees clearly that truth, rationality, and impartiality, suitably qualified, remain centrally important in science, education, and elsewhere.³ We find in his work a valuable account and defense of those intellectual virtues which sustain and promote Enlightenment ideals,⁴ and which are central to any serious understanding of what it means to be an educated person.

Russell sets out to expose simplistic and overly optimistic views about the attainability of truth and rationality and he demonstrates effectively the need for caution. He points out that we can never be sure that our scientific laws are quite right, citing Einstein's advance on Newton as a prime illustration of this point. He shows too that an immense amount of theory is implicated in what is thought of as pure observation, which means that the concept of evidence is inherently problematic. For Russell, a central task of philosophy is to show that what passes for knowledge is very often defective, and consequently he suggests that the demand for certainty is an intellectual vice. He frankly admits that no one can view the world with complete impartiality and advocates that philosophy should promote "a realization of human fallibility" (Russell 1956, 167).

Despite such limitations and qualifications, however, Russell remains adamant that ideals such as truth, impartiality and rationality, and corresponding intellectual virtues such as the wish to find out and a readiness to admit new evidence, remain indispensable to serious inquiry. He consistently champions truth as an ideal towards which we can approximate even if we always fall short of complete certainty (Russell 1985, 149); and he maintains that it is possible to make a continual approach towards impartiality. For Russell, truth and rationality, considered as ideals, remain unaffected by what were, and are, widely

regarded as fatal defects (Russell 1985, 36). If such ideals are to be more than empty words, however, a certain outlook and temper of mind is necessary; his conception of the critically receptive outlook represents an attempt to capture something quite central to the spirit of inquiry.

Russell looks first to science to intimate an appropriate standard for inquiry of any kind, and phrases such as the scientific outlook,⁵ the scientific temper, and a scientific habit of mind, are regularly employed by him to convey a range of dispositions and attitudes characteristic not only of science but of all inquiry in an ideal form.⁶ These include a determination to suppress all other desires in the interests of a desire to know, a repudiation of infallible dogma, and a readiness to admit that present views are sure to require modification or outright rejection. For Russell, “the scientific temper is cautious, tentative, and piecemeal; it does not imagine that it knows the whole truth, or even that its best knowledge is true” (Russell 1961a, 245).⁷ This is the attitude which Russell hoped to see reflected in philosophy, and in all forms of inquiry: “Philosophy should be piecemeal and provisional like science; final truth belongs to heaven, not to this world” (Russell 1927, 3).

This scientific spirit encapsulates an ideal for inquiry of every kind, and Russell identifies certain key intellectual traits which characterize an individual genuinely committed to inquiry, in particular (i) a strong desire to know, and (ii) great caution in believing that one knows (Russell 1927, 3).⁸ The tension between these traits is palpable. A definite readiness to welcome and accept new ideas in the interests of acquiring knowledge is moderated, balanced, and held in check by a disposition to subject such new ideas to careful assessment before they are accepted. Conversely, excessive caution in accepting ideas is tempered by a great desire to add to one’s store of knowledge. Critical receptiveness keeps alive the desire to increase one’s knowledge while ensuring that the beliefs we eventually come to accept have passed scrutiny.

Russell thinks of science as the field where our greatest hopes for something close to genuine knowledge obtain, but even here an appropriate measure of doubt and tentative

acceptance make clear the guarded nature of our beliefs; every scientific conclusion, says Russell, is capable of revision in the light of new evidence. At the same time, a strong desire to acquire further knowledge serves to mitigate any tendency to be merely dismissive and contemptuous of new and controversial ideas, and encourages a willingness to look seriously at what can be said for them; and the absence of good evidence at the moment does not preclude entertaining the idea that such propositions might possibly be true. In the case of claims concerning extra-sensory perception, for example, Russell repudiates the prejudice which many scientists display, and insists that we be “guided solely by the evidence in coming to a conclusion” (See Slater 1997, 439).⁹

A person possessed of an inquiring spirit will, in Russell’s words, love to know, and hate to be in error, in equal measure (Russell 1950, 46). Hating error suggests the need to cultivate the habit of weighing evidence as well as the various skills and abilities which complement that disposition. When Russell brings to mind how people have often been misled by vicious propaganda, he occasionally goes so far as to say that if, in exposing such bias, education were to foster cynical skepticism in children, at least that may make them immune to such propaganda in the future. It is more accurate, however, to think of his general position as one supporting critical reflection rather than cynicism or extreme skepticism (See Slater 1997, 434).¹⁰ Merely negative criticism and cynicism are transformed into constructive doubt if curiosity and receptivity to knowledge are encouraged.

Receptiveness and a love of knowledge entail an openness to ideas especially when those ideas potentially challenge beliefs we already hold. Genuine openness, as Neil Cooper puts it, involves “a readiness to connect the new with the old and to restructure, if necessary, the whole web of our belief” (Cooper 1994, 464).¹¹ It is considerably more than a merely polite and superficial willingness to tolerate an opposing or novel point of view, behavior which may very well lack what Russell calls “any inward readiness to give weight to the other side” (Russell 1971, 106). True receptiveness thrives on what Russell calls “the love

of mental adventure, the sense of worlds to conquer by enterprise and boldness in thought” (Russell 1971, 108). It also involves an openness to people which recognizes that we have much to learn from others, not only from recognized experts, and it suggests a willingness to listen in an open-minded spirit. As Russell puts it in one of his striking images, a person should not become a kind of hedgehog, “all bristles to keep the world at a distance” (Russell 1973a, 45).

Receptiveness is not to be thought of as a disposition to remain undecided, if such a general disposition were even possible, since openness to evidence will naturally lead to the formation of beliefs.¹² Suspended judgment is certainly appropriate at times, especially when the experts are agreed that there is no adequate basis for a definite opinion, but Russell also points out that it is necessary to learn to act upon the best hypothesis without dogmatically believing it. A sincere willingness to consider whatever may be said subsequently against one’s beliefs is indicative of one’s ongoing receptiveness despite the fact that tentative beliefs have been adopted. Nor does receptiveness demand a precipitate abandonment of presently held beliefs, in favor of a new view, at the first hint of possible counterevidence; what is required instead is a genuine inner commitment to consider the merits of the newly emerging evidence.¹³

Being receptive to ideas without appropriate critical assessment leads to credulity, and the increasing ease with which misinformation can be spread leads Russell to view credulity as a greater evil than ever before. If completely unrestrained, receptiveness drifts inexorably in this direction, culminating in a willingness to accept an idea as true although no good reason is offered for it.¹⁴ Any such tendency needs to be offset by encouraging the development of a critical habit of mind (Russell 1973a, 156).¹⁵ Equally, however, a critical outlook devoid of any inward readiness to take new and contrary ideas seriously leads to incredulity which effectively puts a halt to learning and inquiry, and merely reinforces complacent dogmatism. Russell pinpoints the dilemma precisely in his observation that “it is not only that [people] are credulous where they should be sceptical; it is just as much that

they are incredulous where they should be receptive” (Russell 1973a, 41). The challenge is to find the balance.

Openness to new ideas, then, must be accompanied by a critical assessment of those ideas if a person is to avoid becoming, in Paulo Freire’s words, “an ‘empty’ mind passively open to the reception of deposits of reality from the world outside” (Freire 1993, 56). Such critical thinking involves a number of dispositions. It requires taking a close look at our beliefs, and at claims to knowledge advanced by others, in order to judge to what extent they are supported by reason and evidence, which Russell sometimes calls the habit of attempting to see things truly. In addition, critical thinking involves trying to turn the spotlight on assumptions, preconceptions, and those aspects of experience which are all around us but unnoticed.¹⁶ It encompasses finding ways of resisting attempts by others to impose their ideas and deprive us of the ability to think for ourselves; here we can think of Russell’s tireless condemnation of propaganda. In these various ways, an individual tries to employ critical judgment without compromising that receptiveness to ideas which prevents criticism from hardening into closed-mindedness. The need for the twin aspects of critical receptiveness is captured perfectly in Russell’s reminder that “submission to truth is as important as refusal to submit to the judgment of others” (See Rempel 1995, 421).

Critical receptiveness involves assessing the merits of ideas by looking carefully but sympathetically at the reasons and evidence both in favor and against. Such sympathy can prevent criticism from degenerating into knee-jerk skepticism which is destructive and ultimately cynical, where incredulity ultimately triumphs over receptiveness.¹⁷ Russell suggests, for example, that it may be appropriate to put one’s critical evaluation on hold temporarily to ensure that a fair hearing is given; he favors “a kind of hypothetical sympathy, until it is possible to know what it feels like to believe in [the] theories, and only then a revival of the critical attitude” (Russell, 1961b, 58).¹⁸ That ultimate demand for evidence does not itself put one’s receptiveness in question; it is indeed an important aspect of being receptive, in this case to the possibility that evidence may indeed be at hand to

support a view which at first seems incredible or to overturn a view one presently holds. Much depends, of course, on the spirit in which the demand is made; sometimes it can indeed seem suspiciously as if nothing will ever count as sufficient evidence. In such cases, the demand merely disguises the fact that our minds are closed.

Russell's account helps us to appreciate that it is a difficult matter of judgment to find the appropriate balance between receptiveness and criticism in practice, and also to recognize when we and others are giving each of these dispositions their due. The matter is further complicated by the fact that our sense of where the balance is at present shifts from one context, and one community, to another. If we think in terms of the general public and the influence of the media, we may conclude that a healthy dose of reflective skepticism is just what is required to counteract what Richard Dawkins calls "the current epidemic of paranormal propaganda."¹⁹ Other contemporary scientists, however, thinking primarily of the attitudes of practicing scientists, believe that the scales are skewed very much in favor of negative criticism when it comes to unorthodox views or extraordinary claims which appear to threaten well-established scientific beliefs, and they argue for a greater degree of receptivity. Brian Josephson, for example, argues that the claims of "heretical scientists" are dismissed as "nonsense or impossible, generally without any serious attempt to look at the evidence" (Josephson, 1994).²⁰ The essence of his objection is not that the unorthodox claims he mentions are actually credible, but that their merits have not been seriously assessed in a genuine scientific inquiry. Josephson is himself somewhat skeptical, but he refuses to say a priori that something cannot be the case. He fears that various "defence mechanisms" spring into action to defend the "purity" of science, and that claim, if true, would clearly undermine the kind of receptiveness which calls for an impartial assessment of an unorthodox claim in the light of evidence.²¹

A fine contemporary statement embodying the attitude involved in critical receptiveness and acknowledging the problem of satisfying both dimensions is found in the writings of the late Carl Sagan who warned against the danger of skeptical criticism

degenerating into a debunking of everything new and different: “....what is called for is an exquisite balance between two conflicting needs: the most skeptical scrutiny of all hypotheses that are served up to us and at the same time a great openness to new ideas....But if you are able to exercise only one of these modes, which ever one it is, you’re in deep trouble” (Sagan 1987, 41-2). Sagan thought of these needs as involving a seemingly self-contradictory mix of attitudes, but somehow justice had to be done to both aspects. Such conflicting demands seem likely to call for a “tolerance for ambiguity” in the individual if a finely-tuned critical receptiveness is not to collapse into a one-sided emphasis on one aspect to the exclusion of the other. Sagan’s perceptive comments offer some encouragement that Russell’s insights have filtered through to our own day to help illuminate the complex nature of the inquiring spirit and skeptical outlook.

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Notes

¹ See Skeptical Inquirer 24, 6, 2000: 23-28.

² Russell actually speaks of critical undogmatic receptiveness (Russell 1985, 117). I believe that “critical receptiveness” captures everything which is essential to the idea; if the attitude is critical, it cannot be dogmatic.

³ Russell’s views are foreshadowed in the writings of Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914) who observed that science is “infested with over-confident assertion” (1.137). Peirce acknowledged that reason can never hope to attain “absolute certainty” (1.141), proclaiming the fallibilist principle that “we can never be absolutely sure of anything” (1.141). Nevertheless, Peirce retained a deep conviction that it was vital to be “seized with a great desire to learn the truth” (1.235), and insisted that genuine inquiry is undertaken “regardless of what the color of that truth may be” (7.605). References are to volume and paragraph in the Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce (Hartshorne, Weiss, and Burks eds. 1931-58). (Cited in subsequent notes as Peirce, Collected Papers.) I am primarily indebted to Susan Haack for her rich and illuminating account of Peirce’s remarks on intellectual virtue (Haack, 1998).

⁴ This is not to say that open-mindedness and critical thinking will guarantee that truth or objectivity will be achieved, nor that they are invariably desirable, but that there is a presumption in favor of these traits for anyone who takes the pursuit of truth seriously (Hare 1985, 4).

⁵ Russell remarks elsewhere that the scientific outlook is the intellectual counterpart of what is, in the practical sphere, the outlook of liberalism (Russell 1950, 28).

⁶ Here again, there is an interesting parallel with Peirce who had spoken of the scientific spirit (Collected Papers 1.34, 1.55, 1.148), by which he meant to convey an attitude of mind which takes seriously a commitment to the pursuit of truth, a determination to root out error, and a readiness to discard faulty views.

⁷ “Best knowledge” here must be interpreted along such lines as that which appears to be most securely established as knowledge, to preserve the conceptual link between knowledge and truth.

⁸ Peirce, in a remarkably similar way, had proposed two qualifications for the true scientist: (i) having as the dominant passion in one’s soul a determination to find out the truth in some area, whatever the color of that truth may be; (ii) a talent for severely critical thought. Peirce, Collected Papers 7.605.

⁹ Russell made this comment in 1953, and it is possible that his assessment would differ today in view of further experimentation since that time. For example, he also considered the claims of astrology in the same context, and in that case his verdict was that there was so much evidence against astrology that it would be a waste of research funds to look further into the matter. At the same time, however, he conceded that if a private researcher were able to establish a prima facie case in favor of astrology, then the true scientific outlook would require that a fresh examination of the evidence be undertaken.

¹⁰ When Russell defends the value of skepticism, he makes it clear that he rejects extreme forms of skepticism and defends a more moderate, rational form (Russell 1985, 11).

¹¹ For an excellent discussion of critical receptiveness in the context of literary studies, see Alter (1998).

¹² By contrast, as Herbert Feigl reminds us, the mind of the extreme skeptic is “open at both ends” -- everything floats through and nothing sticks (Feigl 1976, 74).

¹³ Neil Cooper (1994, 462) points out the virtue of intellectual pertinacity. And Basil Mitchell similarly commends a “principle of tenacity” which allows a belief to be persevered with long enough for its potentiality to be properly explored (Mitchell 1976, 107).

¹⁴ Scheffler’s reminder that acceptance can also mean simply taking an idea seriously enough to look into it further is very useful in reconnecting receptiveness with criticism: “...the tentative acceptance of a relatively unsupported hypothesis is compatible with acknowledgement of controlling tests to which future experience will subject it” (Scheffler 1967, 86).

¹⁵ For an account of Russell’s views on critical thinging, see Hare (1999).

¹⁶ To enable us, in Peirce’s words, “to perceive what stares us in the face with a glare that, once noticed, becomes almost oppressive with its insistency” (1.134). Russell (1973b, 91) speaks of going through life “imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense”.

¹⁷ Peirce also makes the point that a scientist will, for the time being, entertain and respect a hypothesis which is “wildly incredible”, though in due course it will be “cleared away” if it fails to withstand scrutiny (1.120).

¹⁸ John Passmore (1994, 47) provides an interesting autobiographical example of the attitude Russell has in mind when he comments on his own reaction to generalizations about art: “My first reaction when I encounter such a generalization....is to welcome it with enthusiasm. It is a view I very much like. But then counterexamples pour into my mind....”

¹⁹ Dawkins (1998) believes that an interest in the paranormal reflects the same sense of wonder and appetite for mystery which is so important in science, but that audiences are not encouraged to be critical and demand “a certain minimal standard of evidence.” Peirce was sympathetic to the “wild play of the imagination” in science, but this did not prevent him from roundly condemning “rank charlatans” who try to establish foregone conclusions without regard to evidence (1.235).

²⁰ Josephson shared the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1973.

²¹ No doubt Josephson would agree that, in the absence of anything in the way of serious evidence, as in the claim that some people possess the ability to remotely-view the earth three hundred years in the future, receptiveness to such claims, in the sense of according them any probability whatever, is indistinguishable from gullibility (See Gardner, 1997). Courtney Brown’s bizarre claims alluded to here are set out in Cosmic Voyage: A Scientific Discovery of Extraterrestrials Visiting Earth New York: Dutton, 1996.